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R. P. Blackmur and Randall Jarrell on Literary Magazines: An Exchange

STEPHEN BURT

In October 1946 R. P. Blackmur wrote to several leading figures in American letters asking for their opinions on "what literary magazines now being published in the United States are of most use to literature," with a view towards potential funding for them from an undisclosed source. (He may have had in mind any of several foundations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, which in 1949 contributed startup money for Princeton's Christian Gauss Seminars, or perhaps Princeton University itself.) Jarrell was then a few months into his one-year term as literary editor at the Nation in New York City (temporarily replacing Margaret Marshall). Jarrell's response follows. The letter does not appear in either edition of Randall Jarrell's Letters, having been discovered too late to be included in Mary Jarrell's recent Revised and Expanded version. Both Blackmur's letters and Jarrell's response (along with the other responses, most of them much shorter) are now in the R. P. Blackmur Papers, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Blackmur's letter takes up one typed page; Jarrell's letter occupies seven handwritten pages, on both sides of Nation stationery.

The letter shows both men at pivots in their careers. Blackmur, who founded the literary journal Hound & Horn in 1928, had taught at Princeton since 1940, but was still building its creative writing program: his letter shows him still in search of literary projects for which Princeton could become a home. In 1941 Jarrell opined in The New Republic that "nothing would have more value for criticism than the existence of a few hundred or thousand detailed critical analyses, done by first-rate critics, of important English poems." By 1951 he was complaining that "a greater and greater proportion of what we read is criticism." Readers who think about Jarrell's changing views ought to consider (what these letters make apparent) his knowledge of the practicalities involved in running a literary magazine, in soliciting, editing, organizing and even selling literature and commentary about it. Jarrell had such knowledge even before his New York year, since he saw John Crowe Ransom's work on Kenyon Review, and corresponded with Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate in their first years at the Southern Review and the Sewanee. (The Southern Review under Warren, in fact, offered Jarrell's first published work of criticism, a roundup of ten novels from 1935.) Jarrell in 1946 had not given

up the idea that what he called "intensive" criticism (writing focused on particular works of art, at length, rather than broad cultural trends or book-reviews) ought to be encouraged, he also tells Blackmur that a journal devoted entirely to poetry and fiction would matter even more than a journal of criticism; crucially, however, he adds that the former sort of journal would be "much the most difficult" to sustain, since good poems and stories – unlike good criticism – are rarely written to order. (I am grateful to Mary Jarrell and Joseph Frank for their permissions to publish these letters.)

12 Princeton Avenue
Princeton
New Jersey

October 25, 1946

Dear Jarrell:

For reasons that will later become apparent, we should be very grateful for your best opinion as to what literary magazines now being published in the United States are of most use to literature. The sort of magazines we have in mind are those of the various types represented by *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Partisan Review*, *Accent*, *Sewanee Review* and others that will doubtless occur to you – and we hope you will name what seem to you the best of them. On the safe assumption that literary magazines like these always need money and that their contributors are always paid too little, if at all, the object of our question is, first, to take advice as to what existing magazines most deserve such help and, on their record, why; and second, to devise methods of obtaining and distributing such help.

If you have read Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich's "The Little Magazines," you will have fresh in mind the general precarious picture of the magazines and their contributors over the last forty years, and at the same time their great use to literature. It is that which we most want you to define with respect to the magazines which at present interest you. Beyond that, please choose your own terms for your answers. It would, however, be hard to avoid such topics as, for example:

- Introduction of new writers;
- Support of talented writers, young and older;
- Maintaining of critical standards;
- Interest in the other arts and in society.

But these topics are merely suggestive.

Finally, though we do not wish to hurry you, we do hope that the question itself will, so to speak, precipitate an answer. Our interest in what you may have to say could not be more serious or more immediate. In short, we are writing you in the belief that, with your aid, genuine action might shortly become possible toward the consistent support of several literary magazines. Certainly any effort, not plainly futile, is worth making.

P.S. Please address replies to R. P. Blackmur at the address from which this letter is written.

*

[late October or November 1946]

Dear Blackmur:

Since you want an answer soon, I'll just write out whatever comes to my head. I think the *Partisan* has been decidedly the best of these magazines. *Poetry* is almost useless: it prints names and, the rest of the time, *anything* – unless some intelligent people can run it (and I suppose this will never happen) it surely ought not to be supported. But a reasonably sensible magazine with nothing but poetry – and reviews of poetry – would be valuable. (*Poetry* introduces new poets just as the rain falls on the just and the unjust.)

The *Sewanee*, lately, has been quietly good; it's been hurt by personal idiosyncrasy (some of the queer God Bless the Old South articles) and by its concentration on a few people who do just the *sort* of thing the editor wants, though not very well. It and *Kenyon* and *Partisan* are rather obviously the best three magazines of the sort. It's particularly good in being a place where long sober analyses can get published. I imagine under [John] Palmer it will be fairly *Southern Reviewish*. The great Trouble with the *Sewanee* is sure to be a sort of innocent, doctrinaire, mechanical following of Ransom-Tate-*Understanding Poetry* standards and formulas; but at least this will get some intensive analysis printed, though most of it will be poor. The *Sewanee's* foreign *Criterion* connections will get a few good things that might not come out here; and more bad, of course, but a different kind of bad from ours. It's the ideal place for printing big, long, heavy stuff like the things Winters is writing but not printing. If it were supported (and guided with a few gentle shoves) it could do quite a bit of good.

What hurts *Kenyon* most is the lyric, enthusiastic, irrelevant part of the editing: it has printed, consistently, some of the worst stories anybody ever wrote or read, and it often does queer or absurd things like its two reviews of Shapiro's last book [*V-Letter*]. Besides this, it is often innocently academic. In spite of all this I imagine it's the second best of these magazines – it ought, very obviously, to be supported.

Accent is on a lower level – compare its anthology with the *Partisan Reader*: It is valuable mostly as a catch-all, a place where names send things from the bottoms of their trunks, where young writers can have things printed, where fairly good not well-enough-known critics can

criticize things. It's more of a little magazine in the invidious sense than it should be. But it's had a number of good things, a few by new people.

Partisan has been the best of these magazines for many reasons. For one thing, its editors have much the best sense of literary market values, of what's worth most just now; this gives it a contemporary, cosmopolitan, "exciting" feel that the other magazines don't have. (But it also prevents it from printing long analyses, things that aren't popular or just about to be popular, etc.) It's had the best stories of any of these magazines, obviously; its poetry may have been the best, though it's hard to decide – it had more of Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop early than the other magazines. (Here it's handicapped by having only one editor who knows a lot about poetry.) Although its politics are doctrinaire and academic in that funny New York professional-left way, they haven't prevented it from printing other groups, "Stalinists" excepted. It's an awfully shrewd, professional, competent magazine, so far as the editing is concerned. The worst things about it are its extraordinary limitations and lack of imagination: everything is looked at from the point of view of someone who's semi-Marxist, fairly avant-garde, reasonably Bohemian, anti-bourgeois, cosmopolitan, anti-Stalinist, lives in New York, likes Mondrian, etc., etc., etc. It assumes that New York is the Paris of America, that the United States is Europe all over again, a backward Europe: in fact, it's barely an American magazine, and always sinks with a sigh of joy into the friendly harbor of Sartre, Camus, Silone, the great European writers. (This Sartre-Camus isn't *my* joke: two of the editors said to me that American writers would be as good as Camus and Sartre if they had a movement like existentialism to organize and inspire them.) *Partisan* itself is too much of a movement: the editors will print bad things by "our" people that they wouldn't consider from outsiders – take Paul Goodman, take Elizabeth Hardwick's story about Tillich, etc. A thoroughly good magazine would require editors who like things simply because they're good; people who care for intrinsic values first of all, and who understand better – either because of memory or because of imagination – what it's like to make a work of art. But the *Partisan Review* is not only the best of these magazines, it's the one that makes most difference to people, and the one that, with money, might end up with a much larger circulation. If it somehow came to take a less personal-political point of view it would be improved.

In a magazine that prints stories, poems, and criticism, criticism forces everything out because it's the only one you can *depend* on – you can depend both on getting fairly good criticism regularly and having your readers see that it's fairly good. (Compare the "creative" work in the *Criterion* with the critical.) This is a bad situation; but it may be impossible to do anything about it, since readers want a magazine to have everything. But everything fosters criticism, criticism about criticism, etc. – and this is very bad. (People are always bothering you to write articles and reviews about everything or anything; but there is a pale polite warmth around their requests for poems.) If you can in any way encourage a magazine that will care first about works of art, and only second about their criticism, you will do a great deal of good.

The *Southern Review* was a better magazine than any of these both in introducing new writers and in supporting talented writers. *Partisan* might as well pay you in postage stamps. It has been

rather good about introducing new writers, though – from young ones like [Isaac] Rosenfeld to old ones like [Wylie] Sypher.

It might be valuable to try to encourage several different kinds of magazine: *Partisan* has the best chance to wind up as a general monthly with a respectable circulation a la *The Dial*. Somebody should have a thoroughly critical magazine – analysis, long articles, aesthetics, and nothing else; it would be a quarterly, and couldn't expect much circulation, but it could have great value both in "maintaining of critical standards" and in representing Criticism as opposed to book-reviewing, scholarship, and sociological-economical history. A magazine, maintained on any decent level, that had nothing but stories, novelettes, sketches, poems, serialized novels, and so on, would be most valuable of all – and much the most difficult, of course.

You tell *me* about "methods for obtaining and distributing such help"; I'd like to hear and don't know. Any arrangement that pays fairly good writers for writing fairly well would be a good thing.

I hope what I've written will be of some use to you: there are so many things to say that it's hard to choose between them. I haven't tried to phrase criticism of the magazines tactfully, or to justify what I say.

Yours,

Randall Jarrell

Stephen Burt teaches at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. His book *Randall Jarrell and His Age* won the Warren-Brooks Award for 2002; his edition of Jarrell's lectures on W.H. Auden will appear in late 2005.